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ABSTRACT

In 1987 Middlesex Community College in Massachusetts opened two new campuses: one in Lowell, serving primarily Asian and Hispanic students, and the other in Bedford, serving mostly Caucasian students having limited experience with other cultures. To ensure that both campuses were viewed equally and that a tone of racial harmony was established, the staff of the college's Student Development department implemented the following seven initiatives: (1) valuing diversity became the focus of the college orientation program; (2) free, six-week English as a Second Language programs were developed for all community members; (3) the student activities budget was revised to focus on programs that address diversity; (4) international student fellowships were created; (5) an international club was created on campus; (6) the Freshman Seminar curriculum was revised to integrate an appreciation of cultural differences; and (7) a student improvisational theater troupe was created to focus on student issues. The initiatives have had positive results. In exit surveys, graduates have cited improvements in becoming aware of other cultures and listening to what others have to say, while responses to student needs assessments suggest that the college's racial climate is accepting. Finally, minority student retention has also increased at the college, from 40% between 1988 and 1989 to 49% between 1993 and 1994, although it is still slightly below the college's overall retention rate. (BCY)

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Creating A Campus Climate That Truly Values Diversity

MIDDLESEX COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Bedford & Lowell Massachusetts

June 1997

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CREATING A CAMPUS CLIMATE THAT TRULY VALUES DIVERSITY

MIDDLESEX COMMUNITY COLLEGE
Bedford & Lowell, Massachusetts

1. INTRODUCTION

This program describes a series of initiatives that Middlesex Community College undertook to create a campus climate where students truly value differences in others and appreciate cultural diversity.

The college has gone through tremendous changes in the last ten years which have created serious, yet exciting challenges for the Student Development staff. Middlesex Community College originally was founded in 1970 in Bedford, Massachusetts, a suburban community 20 miles northwest of Boston, and occupied quarters at a Veterans Administration Hospital. As the college grew over the years, it expanded to include additional temporary sites in the surrounding Bedford area.

In 1987, Middlesex opened a campus in Lowell, Massachusetts, and the plan for the next five years was that Middlesex would evolve into two permanent campuses: one in Bedford and one in Lowell. The opening of the Lowell campus occurred at a time when the city of Lowell was experiencing intense growth that was creating great stress within the city. There was a huge influx of Southeast Asians who settled in Lowell during the 1980's, resulting in the largest population of Southeast Asians in the United States outside Long Beach, CA. In addition, there were a substantial number of Hispanics who live in Lowell. Gangs of youth became a problem in the city, and racial tensions were high. When the college opened in Lowell, the Lowell public schools were admitting up to 250 new Southeast Asian students per week, and the drop out rate for minority students at Lowell High School was dramatic. As the Middlesex campus opened in Lowell, it was critical for the College to establish a campus climate that encouraged harmony among students of different cultures and backgrounds.

The student population at the Middlesex campus in Lowell grew very quickly, from 392 students in 1987, with 75 Hispanics and 25 Southeast Asians, to 2547 students, with 25 percent minorities, by 1994. The largest groups of minority students were Southeast Asians and Hispanics, but there were substantial numbers of student representing countries throughout the world.

At about the same time the Lowell campus was opening, the Bedford campus, located 12 miles south of Lowell, was fortunate to receive funding for a new permanent campus which opened in 1992. Students at the Bedford campus were primarily from surrounding suburban towns northwest of Boston. They were generally first generation college students, and only about 9 percent were minority. The vast majority of students in Bedford had limited experience with other cultures, and many, according to faculty and staff, were not tolerant of those who were different from them. By 1993, both campuses had an equal number of students that totaled approximately 7,000.

The challenge for the College and for the Student Development staff during this period of change was enormous. How could we set a tone that created racial harmony and encouraged students from different cultures to appreciate one another? How could we insure that both campuses would be viewed equally so that one was not considered a "minority" campus and one a "majority" campus? How could we encourage tolerance among students at the Bedford campus, when they had so little exposure to other races and cultures? And how could we be sure that racial and cultural tensions would not develop at the Lowell campus, where there was such a mix of students? The challenge was compounded by the fact that these were extremely difficult fiscal times, with little if any chance of additional staff. Although funding was available to build and purchase new campuses, there was virtually no funding available to provide new support services. We had to design programs using the resources we had.

There was a consensus of opinion that was made early on which helped to establish a foundation for our initiatives in Student Development. First, we agreed that neither campus should be viewed as primary, and that whatever initiatives we undertook should be done at both campuses. Every student at Middlesex needed to understand and accept the importance of valuing diversity, regardless of which campus he or she attended. Second, the importance of valuing diversity had to be seen as a primary goal the Student Development area had established on campus, and our initiatives had to be visible and continually emphasized. Third, we had to provide opportunities for our students to see and experience different cultures. Many, unless we provided an opportunity, would never have that chance. Fourth, we wanted to provide substantive programs. Offering such activities as international festivals which featured foods from different countries alone would not be enough. Finally, members of the Student Development staff had to collaborate with all members of the college community in achieving these goals. It must be added that the President saw this as a very high priority, and her leadership encouraged the development of new initiatives across all areas of the college.

2. PROGRAM NARRATIVE

This "program" is really a series of initiatives that were created by staff within Student Development, often in collaboration with other areas of the college. The following seven initiatives were developed, all within the last five years, and all remain active initiatives in our effort to sustain the importance of the value of cultural diversity on our campus. This program has received the Region I Exemplary Program Award from the National Council on Student Development (an affiliate council of the American Association of Community Colleges) and was honored by a third place award as an outstanding program in Student Development at the Interassociation Conference (NASPA, NCSD and ACPA) in Dallas, Texas in 1995.

A. Changed the focus of the orientation program to emphasize the importance of valuing diversity.

We agreed that if valuing diversity was the most important value that we wanted to emphasize to students, then students needed to hear that during their first official day at the college. Our orientation program occurs for one day just before classes begin. We eliminated all opening remarks from speakers, with the exception of a brief welcoming message by the President. Instead, we invited a faculty member, followed by a student, to give a keynote address about what valuing differences meant to them. Usually, though not always, the faculty member has been a member of a minority group. The speeches have been deeply moving. Some faculty speak about their own experiences with prejudice; others talk about the impact diversity has had in their lives. The students listen intently, and many have commented about what an impact those speeches have had on them. We emphasize the same theme every year, because our values remain consistently the same.

In addition, we know that visual symbols are important in making a statement to students about our values, so Student Government offered to purchase flags representing the countries of origin of our students. These flags are displayed in the cafeteria at the Bedford and Lowell campuses, and each year at the commencement exercises, the flags are carried first as the line of march begins. These flags are a source of pride for our students.

B. Developed an easy access program for ESL students.

We found that many people in the Lowell community, particularly those with language problems or those who were new to the country, were uncertain about higher education. They were often afraid to begin. We developed a six week beginning and intermediate ESL program (no credit) that is free of charge to anyone in the community. The program is offered approximately three times per year, and about 150 students participate in the program annually. Any given

group has students from as many as 15 different countries who vary in age from 18 to 65. With the help of a currently enrolled staff member, these students bond with one another, which is evident during the graduation ceremony when every member of the class cooks a traditional dish from their country and invites members of the college community to participate in enjoying the food and traditional dance.

This program encourages non native English speaking people from the community, who might never think of college, to try a college experience at no cost. The support and encouragement they receive serves as a catalyst for them to enter the college. The actual cost to the college, aside from the time of the staff member who spends a part of her time supporting these students, involves only the cost of part time faculty who teach these sections and are very devoted to the program. The college, in turn, develops a group of students who have formed support systems and are ready to begin college.

C. Revised a portion of student activities budget to focus on programs that address issues of diversity.

If we wanted to emphasize the importance of diversity, then we had to continue that theme throughout the students' experience at the college. The Associate Dean of Student Development, in collaboration with the Bedford and Lowell student planning boards for student activities, redirected some activities funds and developed a series called "The One World Series: A Community at Work". Each semester, a full series of programs and activities that address issues of diversity are published in a colorful brochure that is distributed to faculty, staff and students. Faculty often work collaboratively with the Student Life office and suggest speakers and programs for this series; many bring their classes to the events. The Dean of the Social Science division has been so impressed with the series that she has encouraged faculty in her division to ask that students attend the series as a part of their course work. The series has been running for six semesters. An example of some of the events for the spring semester series are "Homophobia: Why the Fear?", a presentation by John French; "Gender and Human Rights in Latin America," a presentation by Marjorie Agosin; "Bigotry in America," a presentation by Philip Permutter, "Wildest Dreams," original world beat and an exhibit on black heritage art and clothing, and "Ethnic Man!", one American's discovery of race and culture. Each semester the series includes various types of activities, including music, lectures, and other events, all of which emphasize the theme of valuing differences.

D. Developed opportunities for students to experience different cultures by creating international student fellowships.

We knew that many of our students had never been to any country beyond the United States; some, in fact, had never been outside Massachusetts. How could our students begin to experience different cultures and customs when most could not afford to travel extensively? The Student Government was strongly in favor of creating opportunities to expose students to new cultures, and after some lengthy discussion, they enthusiastically agreed to discontinue a major program they had previously funded, and instead to set aside funds that could be used as fellowships for international study. These funds became a permanent component of the Student Activities budget, and, as a result, the international fellowship program was created.

This is the fifth year that the fellowships have been offered. The fellowship program consists of a three credit course involving a series of lectures about the culture, history and customs of a particular country along with a trip to visit the country itself. Under the fellowships, we have sent twelve students along with two faculty advisors over the past five years on study opportunities to China, one group to Russia, and two groups to the Netherlands. All expenses, including travel, food and lodging, are covered under either the fellowship funds or by arrangement with the host country. The students pay for only their passport, visa, incidental expenses, and the cost of enrolling in a standard three credit course. Arrangements for travel, accommodations and funding through the Chinese representatives are all made by the Dean of Economic and Community Development, who has been an invaluable partner in establishing this program.

This year, for example, we will be selecting twelve students and two faculty advisors for the China fellowship program. Prior to the trip itself, the students and advisors will attend about 15 hours of lecture on Chinese history and culture taught by arrangement with a faculty member at the College. They also will participate in an overnight group experience led by the Associate Dean of Student Development and members of the Student Development staff so that the group can develop connections and bonds which will support them through the travel experience. The trip itself begins in late July and lasts for three weeks. The group first visits the East/West Center at the University of Hawaii to hear a series of lectures about Chinese culture. They then travel on to Beijing, the Great Wall, Shandong Province, Shanghai, Hainan Island and Hong Kong. Again, all plane, hotel, and meal expenses are covered either by the International Student Fellowship Fund or by the Tourism Bureau in Jinan and Hainan Island. When the students return, they are required to write a paper about their experience and to contribute in some way to the college community (many give lectures in classes; others develop displays on various topics on China). Each group develops a series

of pictures which are enlarged and displayed in public places throughout the College.

Any student who has completed 12 credits or more can apply by completing an essay about why they wish to participate in the fellowship program and by getting faculty or staff recommendations. A committee of past student participants, current and past advisors, faculty and staff review the applications and select applicants for interviews. Since cost for the fellowship program is minimal, competition is keen.

These fellowship opportunities have literally changed students' lives. Some students who are selected have never been on an airplane before. One student had lived for a while with her children in a shelter for battered women and had never been beyond the Lowell/Boston area. Others have decided to focus on international relations as a result of participating in the program. Two of our students who had participated in one of the first fellowships to China have recently graduated from Tufts University with a special interest in international relations. Of these two, one had been a chef full time before he attended Middlesex, and the other ran a cleaning service.

Most of all, these students are exposed to a world that is totally different from the one they have known, and they return with a new appreciation for cultural diversity. Through their enthusiasm in class presentations and discussions, along with pictures that are permanently displayed for each fellowship group, they have opened the eyes of all Middlesex students to the value of cultural differences.

E. Created an international club on campus.

We wanted to encourage collaboration among various ethnic groups of students, and rather than creating separate clubs for each ethnic group, the students and staff decided to create one overall club, called the International Club, which would represent all groups. Students who participate in the club include those from many different cultures and countries as well as racial groups. There are celebrations, music, lectures, and countless other activities that this club plans. One of the highlights is a trip to Washington, DC which is partially subsidized by Student Activity funds and fund-raisers that the club initiates. This year, 29 students and 4 faculty/staff advisors will participate in the Washington trip, including students from Russia, Zimbabwe, Vietnam, Cambodia, Mexico, Columbia, and from other countries as well as those who were born in the United

States. Ages range from those who have just graduated from high school to those who are grandmothers, and most have never seen the nation's capital. These students will cruise the Potomac, visit the White House, the Holocaust Museum, attend a dinner theater, and see several other sights. Anyone from the College can apply to participate. The trip is unique because students from so many nationalities spend a long weekend together and see the nation's capital together for the first time. Again, this experience, along with many activities the International Club designs, creates a special camaraderie and high level of good will among students from many different cultures and races.

F. Integrated the appreciation of cultural differences into the Freshman Seminar curriculum.

Freshman Seminar is a one credit course that is team taught by faculty and Student Development staff and is required for all entering students enrolled in the Liberal Arts and Sciences and Liberal Studies programs. Approximately 25 class sections are offered each fall semester and a smaller number are offered in the spring.

We revised the Freshman Seminar curriculum within the last three years to include several components that stress the importance of valuing differences. Faculty who teach in the program can choose from a variety of teaching options, including discussion tapes about diversity issues and exercises that have been developed by staff. Faculty and staff who teach Freshman Seminar are trained each year in diversity. In addition, two faculty and two staff who teach Freshman Seminar are part of a larger, intense training program that the College has undertaken this year to discuss teaching techniques and to improve the sensitivity of faculty regarding issues of diversity. The faculty training program for the college this year was possible because of modest grant funding.

These four individuals will revise the Freshman Seminar curriculum even further to include substantive components on diversity issues. The evaluation of these revisions will occur over the next few years.

G. Developed a student improvisational theater troupe.

Under grant funding that was allocated for one year to Wellesley College in collaboration with Middlesex and other surrounding colleges, selected Middlesex Community College students and faculty were able to develop a student improvisational theater troupe that focuses on pertinent student issues such as

valuing differences. The grant funding was available for only one year, but the troupe has continued for the last several years and appears to be more active each year. The program was initially arranged through the efforts of the Director of Health Services, but it has continued and grown with the collaboration and leadership of a faculty member from the Humanities division. When this theater troupe performs, students in the audience really listen, and there is a discussion period after each vignette when those in the audience are engaged and responsive. This troupe has received recognition beyond the College, and they actively perform, as time allows, in public schools and agencies in the surrounding area.

These are the major initiatives that Student Development has developed over the last few years in an effort to create a positive campus climate where students value differences and appreciate cultural diversity. It is important to emphasize, though, that there have been many initiatives across the whole College community toward this end. Faculty have received training in Asian and Hispanic cultures, with funding from such organizations as the National Endowment for the Humanities. Faculty have been actively revising their curriculum to reflect appreciation of other cultures. Through the efforts of the Dean of Economic and Community Development, the College has had many visitors and scholars on campus from China, Russia, South Africa, Columbia, and countless other countries. Any large scale effort to change attitudes and create a new campus awareness involves a whole College effort, and this has been the case at Middlesex Community College.

3. EVALUATION

We were anxious to know whether these efforts made a difference in student attitudes and whether the minority student retention rate had improved. There are several means of assessment that we use in Student Development, all of which have been created by the Student Development staff. First, we distribute a student needs assessment and a separate faculty assessment of student needs every three years. Second, we have forms to evaluate our services in every department. Third, the Dean of Student Development meets with a faculty focus group, consisting of approximately 25 faculty, and a separate student focus group, consisting of 30 students who have been nominated by faculty. Finally, the Student Development staff has created an outcomes assessment which measures 22 areas of affective growth and has been given to graduates for the last several years. With respect to retention rates, the Institutional Research office provides that information to us.

We were extremely pleased with the assessment results. In our outcomes assessment, graduating students were asked to measure the influence the college had

on their affective growth using a four point Likert scale. One of the statements is "Becoming aware of people who are different from me in their philosophies, cultures, religions or ways of life." For the 1993 class, graduates placed that statement within the top six out of the twenty-two statements that measured the influence the college had on their growth. In 1996, that statement was listed as the fourth highest response from graduates. More than half the graduates from both classes indicated that the college had "very much influenced" (the highest level on the Likert scale) their growth with response to that statement.

Another response that was listed by graduates within the top five statements that measured the influence the College had on their affective growth was "improving my ability to listen and understand what others are saying." Again, more than half the graduates (64 percent) indicated that the College "very much" influenced their growth in this area. We were pleased that these statements, which address interpersonal skills and awareness of other cultures, were rated so highly.

In the students needs assessment, which was distributed with 543 completed surveys that were representative of the student population, we asked students a variety of questions about the social climate on campus. Student perceived that the racial climate was accepting. Eighty-two percent of the students responded positively to the statement, "Students of different races and cultures can feel comfortable and accepted at Middlesex." More than half (56 percent) said they had made friends from different races or cultures while they have been at Middlesex. This was particularly gratifying to us because we hoped that students would move beyond acknowledging other races and cultures on campus, and would actually develop connections with those who were different from themselves. These student connections among difference races and cultures appeared to be happening. However, only 41 percent of the students responded positively to the statement "Students who are gay or lesbian can feel comfortable and accepted at Middlesex." Clearly, the acceptance of gays and lesbians on campus is an area in which we need to direct more effort.

The written responses from students on the outcomes assessment, and the statements students have given when they meet in focus group meetings with the Dean speak to the impact students have felt about valuing differences on campus. When students were asked on the outcomes assessment how the College has most influenced them, comments have included, "I have developed a respect for every human being," "learned to take others into consideration," "I have grown mostly in my relations with other ethnic people, and I enjoy it," "I have become a mature, intelligent woman. I experience others' values, beliefs, and validate them without judgment, in conjunction with finding myself and my place in this world," "I have grown in being independent and self supportive. I have become more in tune to people's backgrounds and different ways of life. I also have a lot more respect for people of different races," "I have found myself to be more open to others' opinions, ideas. Although I have always been active

in anti-racism, I found that I am more sensitive to this and more receptive to people's feelings." Comments from students in the focus group sessions are very similar.

In terms of minority student retention, the retention rate for entering minority students from fall 1988 to fall 1989 was 40 percent. The retention rate for minorities from fall 1993 to fall 1994 was 49 percent. Clearly, the minority retention rate had improved, although it still lagged behind the overall retention rate. The fall 1988 minority group retention was 9 points lower than the overall student retention rate; the fall 1993 group was only 5 points behind, so there had been some very positive improvement. The retention rate for minority students for fall 1995 to fall 1996 was 52 percent, so there has been a dramatic improvement.

Minority student retention is based on a myriad of factors, and it is difficult to know whether the initiatives we undertook, which were campus wide, had a significant impact on the retention rate of minorities. We can see through the needs assessment, however, that minority students felt accepted on campus, and that other students had made friends with students from different races and cultures. Campus climate certainly has an impact on the comfort level, and in turn, the retention rate of minority students.

Most of all, we were delighted with the responses our graduates related in the outcomes assessments and the student focus groups. Our students are connected with students of other races and cultures, and there is a climate on campus of acceptance and affirmation. This is exactly what we wanted to achieve. Nevertheless, we are aware that this is a constant effort, and we will continually strive to create new programs and initiatives that encourage our students to understand and appreciate the importance of valuing differences in others.

SUMMARY

1. What was the impetus for the program and how does it support the mission of the institution?

Middlesex Community College opened two new campuses within a six year period from 1987 to 1993. One campus, newly opened in 1987, was located in the city of Lowell where there was a large influx of Asian and Hispanic groups, and the other, originally opened in temporary quarters in 1970, was in the suburban town of Bedford where the majority of students were Caucasian.

Since the college was undergoing such enormous change, the mission of the college was revised in the early 1990's and a series of eight major institutional priorities were established. The mission statement was revised to include the importance of valuing cultural diversity within the college community, and one of the eight institutional priorities, developed with input from all members of the college, focused on creating a

campus climate that emphasized the importance of cultural diversity. The task for Student Development, then, was to work collaboratively with all members of the college community to infuse cultural diversity issues into the fabric of the institution.

2. What are your objectives for the program?

Our intent was to create a series of initiatives which would change the campus climate and infuse the value of cultural diversity throughout the college community. We wanted to create programs that could be sustained over a period of time and would not be dependent on limited or transitory budget factors. Our major priority for the program is reflected in the institutional priority established for cultural diversity: "To create a college-wide climate which reflects the cultural diversity of the community through increased multicultural understanding, value for diversity, and global awareness." Our specific objectives included expanding student services which support cultural diversity and global awareness through personal, professional, curricular and campus development. These objectives were developed at college-wide meetings which included administrators, faculty and staff. Throughout our planning, we wanted to emphasize collaboration with other departments and areas of the college.

3. What are the key components and related staff?

There are seven key components which were developed under this program and are described more fully in the narrative. They include 1) changing the focus of the orientation program to emphasize the importance of valuing diversity, 2) developing an easy access program for ESL students, 3) revising a portion of the student activities budget to focus on programs that address issues of diversity, 4) developing opportunities for students to experience different cultures by creating international student fellowships, 5) creating an international club on campus, 6) integrating the appreciation of cultural differences into the Freshman Seminar curriculum, and 7) developing a student improvisational theater troupe. These programs were implemented using current staff and re-allocating existing funds. The only additional funds needed were used to hire part-time faculty in the easy access ESL program (Prepare to Attend College) and for a modest stipend for the student actors in the theater troupe.

4. How is the program organized?

The program is implemented as a collaborative model involving many staff from Student Development who work closely with the students, faculty, and administrators to oversee, refine and enhance the initiatives each year.

5. What are the processes and procedures?

Each of the programs has specific processes and procedures as described in the narrative.

6. How has the program been evaluated for its impact on students and how long has it been in existence?

The programs described have been in existence for approximately five years. Evaluation is based on a student needs assessment, an outcomes assessment, student and faculty focus groups, and retention rates. Detailed evaluation results are described in the narrative.

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